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Merle D. Hay

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Merle D. Hay

Memories of the night of November 2, 1917, are indelibly engraved upon the minds of a few survivors of Company F, Second Battalion of the Sixteenth United States Infantry. On that night, over twenty-five years ago, the opening chapter was written in the illustrious history of the First Division of American troops in the first World War. It was on the night of November 2nd that Company F took over its first front-line position, received its baptism of enemy fire, bore the brunt of the first German raid against American troops, and lost the first killed, wounded, and captured in actual combat.

Not until November 5th, however, were the details of the engagement reported in Iowa newspapers. Of the three men who had been killed, one was Private Merle D. Hay of Glidden, Iowa. Private Dewey D. Kern of Collins was listed as having been captured, but this report was erroneous. Kern was not lost. There was no mis-

take, however, about the death of Merle Hay. He, with Private Thomas Enright and Corporal James Gresham, had paid the supreme sacrifice in a raid that cost America three killed, seven wounded, and eleven captured.

The son of Mr. and Mrs. Harvey D. Hay, Merle was born on July 20, 1896, on an Iowa farm near Carrollton in Carroll County. The story of his boyhood was similar to that of many another Iowa farm boy who grew up to hear his country's call to battle in April, 1917. Merle was one of eight Glidden youths to enlist in the Regular Army early in May. The town gave them a farewell party in the Methodist Church on May 7th and the next morning the little group left for Des Moines. For Merle it was the first step toward France and immortality. Mrs. Hay had a premonition that she had bade her son good-bye for the last time — that he was destined to be killed.

From Des Moines the Glidden boys, still together, were sent to Fort Logan, Colorado, then to Texas, and thence to the Atlantic seaboard. All but one landed in France on June 26 or 27, 1917, as part of the Sixteenth United States Infantry. After arriving at St. Nazaire, the First Division, consisting of the Sixteenth, Eighteenth, Twenty-sixth, and Twenty-eighth Infantry and a Marine detachment, moved by successive steps

into the Gondrecourt Training Area about July 6th. There they received two months of intensive drill in modern warfare under a picked corps of Alpine Chasseurs, the best trained and most courageous of French soldiers. After the completion of this combat training course the regiment moved to Demange-aux-Eau to be ready for front-line duty. On October 23rd the first battalion relieved a French unit in the quiet Sommer-viller sector north of Toul. After a week in which nothing happened, they were moved out and the second battalion including Company F was ordered up for front-line experience. They moved in trucks to Valhey and then on foot into Bathel-emont where, on November 1st, they met the first battalion coming out.

Spending the night at Bathelemont, the replacements, at about five o'clock the next evening, moved into the front lines. The men, loaded down with extra ammunition and equipment, advanced slowly over broken duck boards, across shattered trenches, and through flooded or mud-filled holes. They reached their destination at ten o'clock. Five hours had been required to hike that one long mile. The first platoon with forty-six men, including four automatic riflemen from the fourth platoon, was assigned to the front positions. The occupied area, about one hundred yards in depth,

lay some five hundred yards from the German lines. Both trench systems were on slightly rising ground with a low valley between.

The Americans moved into the position "in good order, without lights, talking or smoking." Privates Hay and Enright were posted as sentries, while Corporal Gresham had charge of the firing squad slightly farther up the trench. Both Gresham and Enright were veterans of several years' service before America had entered the war. All was quiet except for an occasional rat-a-tat-tat from some nervous machine gunner or an occasional Very light from the enemy. Lured by exhaustion and a false sense of safety, most of the company prepared for a few hours' rest.

But that rest was rudely interrupted. At three o'clock in the morning the enemy turned loose what the French observers afterward declared to be "the most intense bombardment they had ever witnessed". Sixteen batteries of ninety-six guns, ranging from one-pounders to six-inch pieces, threw over in forty-five minutes, according to French estimates, several thousand shells. All that saved the battalion from complete annihilation was the depth of the dugouts, the muddy ground, and the absence of loose stones. The concentrated bombardment melted the soggy trenches like butter. "Climbing and stumbling

over the ruins", the commanding lieutenant ordered the men into dugouts. "Only a few remained on outpost duty."

After three-quarters of an hour the bombardment was suddenly shifted into a half-circle barrage in the rear to prevent reinforcement. The raiders blasted gaps in the wire entanglements with long gas pipes filled with explosives, unheard amid the heavier cannonading. In pitch darkness 240 veteran Bavarians penetrated the battered American lines.

The first the Americans knew that the enemy had invaded their position was when machine gun bullets and hand grenades crashed against the dugout entrances. Company F came out fighting in the darkness, unable to tell friend from foe until locked in deadly grapple. "What's up?" shouted one young American. "A shot answered his question. He shot the shooter and next time shot first without questions."

Cut off from reinforcements, their lieutenant partly unconscious from shell shock, knowing only that the enemy was overwhelming them with superior numbers, the little handful of men fought blindly to the last. In the darkness, friend and foe looked alike. It was reported that Corporal Gresham was killed by a man who spoke to him in English. Hay was shot through the head by

one whom he may never have seen. Each died at his post of duty. Enright who was found later on top of the parapet had evidently been surrounded but had put up a terrific fight, as his throat had been cut, his chest ripped open, and his body torn with twelve bayonet wounds.

The German raiders retired after about fifteen minutes, taking their dead and wounded with them and all American equipment they could locate. The American casualties were eleven prisoners, seven wounded, and three dead — twenty-one in all. Thus, nearly half of the platoon was lost in the raid. The Americans were outnumbered more than five to one. No help came until after the merciless artillery fire had ceased. "Though the affair was comparatively trivial in the great war drama, the individual deeds of heroism shine forth with greater intensity."

In the morning the three dead soldiers were carried to the rear where they were buried with simple military rites. With a squad of French infantrymen in their picturesque uniforms of red and horizon blue standing on one side and a detachment of Americans on the other the flag-draped caskets were lowered into the grave as a bugler blew taps and a battery at the front fired minute guns. General Paul Emile Joseph Bordeaux, commanding officer of the French sector,

paid tribute to the first Americans to fall in battle. His words, accompanied by the roar of guns and punctuated by the whistle of shells, touched both the French and Americans.

In the name of the French army and in the name of France, he saluted the valiant men who had sacrificed their lives. "They accepted the hard and strenuous life", he explained, "they crossed the ocean at great peril; they took their places on the front by our side, and they have fallen facing the foe in a hard and desperate hand to hand fight. Their families, friends and fellow citizens will be proud when they learn of their deaths. Honor to them.

"Men," the general continued, "these graves, the first to be dug in our national soil and only a short distance from the enemy, are a mark of the mighty land we and our allies firmly cling to in the common task, confirming the will of the people and the army of the United States to fight with us to a finish, ready to sacrifice as long as is necessary until final victory for the most notable of causes — that of the liberty of nations — the weak as well as the mighty. Thus the deaths of these humble soldiers appear to us with extraordinary grandeur.

"We will, therefore, ask that the mortal remains of these young men be left here, left with us

forever. We inscribe on the tombs, 'Here lie the first soldiers of the republic of the United States to fall on the soil of France for liberty and justice.' The passerby will stop and uncover his head. Travelers and men of heart will go out of their way to come here to pay their respective tributes."

General Pershing, in writing of his experiences in the first World War, remembered that this "joint homage to our dead, there under the fire of the guns, seemed to symbolize the common sacrifices our two peoples were to make in the same great cause. It seemed as though their death had sealed a new pact of understanding and comradeship between the two armies."

At home in Iowa a public memorial service was held in the Presbyterian Church of Glidden on November 12, 1917. With Mayor R. A. Hamilton in charge, resolutions of pride and sorrow were adopted and short talks were made by several local pastors.

The admonition of General Bordeaux, that the graves of the first Americans to fall on the battlefields of Europe should remain in France as a shrine to liberty and justice, was not long observed. In the summer of 1921 the bodies of Enright, Gresham, and Hay were removed from Bathelemont across the Atlantic to their own country. On July 14th Merle Hay came home to Glid-

den. There in the American Legion hall his body lay in state, guarded by men who had been his comrades over there.

Governor Nate E. Kendall had ordered, by official proclamation, that all flags on public buildings be lowered to half-staff on Sunday, July 24, 1921, the day set for the funeral. In a spirit of deep reverence, over ten thousand Iowans went to Glidden for the ceremony. Cars began to arrive early in the morning and transcontinental trains stopped to let off sympathetic passengers. Boy Scouts on duty counted 1835 cars on Main Street and around the schoolhouse square by noon. All traffic on the Lincoln Highway was stopped or detoured. At three o'clock, under the direction of Legion Commander F. W. Franzwa of the Glidden Post, six comrades in olive-drab uniforms and trench hats carried the casket from the Legion hall to a chautauqua platform set up on the schoolhouse lawn, where formal memorial services were held in the presence of Merle's parents, his brother, Basil, his sister, Mrs. H. Cromwell, and thousands of fellow Iowans.

Sheriff W. E. Robb of Polk County and former Chaplain of the 168th Infantry in the Rainbow Division sensed the prevailing attitude when he said, "We will not look upon his grave with sorrow but with the greatest pride." Later he spoke

prophetically: "They fought to relieve militarism as a menace. The fruits of their victory will be only temporary unless we see the vision as they saw it — the flags of the nations grouped together in associations which will prevent the repetition of such a holocaust." Preceded by the uniformed band of Argonne Post of the Des Moines American Legion, the body was slowly borne to the cemetery and with loving hands consigned to its final resting place.

"If it has been necessary that he lay down his life for his country, I'm proud of the boy", commented his father. His mother, overcome with grief and illness, sadly remembered his last letter, mailed somewhere in France on September 28, 1917. "My but I would like to be there and eat some of that stuff you are canning. My but it would taste good. And some of that bread you were baking and some of those sweet rolls that you were writing about. I would surely have some feed. I would eat a dozen of them."

It was of this boy that his lieutenant, Willis E. Comfort, had written soon after that fatal night in November, 1917: "He was a faithful soldier, one we could trust. At all times was his work of high quality but especially at the time of his death did he prove his true worth. He stayed at his post of duty and fought to the last. We are proud of

the true American spirit shown by him and his comrades." Surely it is in the common service of such common people that our nation has become uncommonly great.

But other honors have been paid and will be paid to Merle Hay as long as Iowa stands as a part of a free nation of freedom-loving people. On November 19, 1917, the Des Moines City Council decided to rename the road to Camp Dodge from that city as the Merle Hay Memorial Highway. It seemed appropriate that the road between the capital of the State and the camp where soldiers were being trained should "bear the name of the brave lad who was the first of our soldiers to be killed in action." On May 30, 1921, a huge memorial boulder was dedicated on the highest point on this road, now part of U. S. Highway 64. Major Casper Schenk, the principal speaker on that occasion, reminded the assembled crowd that memories might fade but "here will be a permanent tribute that will stand 1000 years, defying time's erosion, to silently proclaim the name of Iowa's premier hero to the millions that pass along this highway." At Mrs. Hay's request the boulder was unveiled by a private of the Fourteenth Cavalry who was participating in the exercises. Rain interfered with the program somewhat and the crowd had entirely dispersed before

a Curtiss plane piloted by West Close, a former army pilot, circled the spot to drop a wreath of flowers.

On May 27, 1928, a special memorial service in honor of men killed in battle was held at the grave of Merle Hay. Six Legion posts and two companies of the National Guard also participated. Governor John Hammill spoke to three or four thousand people, predicting that this grave would become a shrine for patriotic Iowans.

Two years later Glidden was again the scene of a memorial service. On Sunday, May 25, 1930, before crowds estimated from six to ten thousand people, a monument in honor of Merle D. Hay, for which the State legislature had appropriated five thousand dollars, was unveiled in Westlawn Cemetery. The beautiful memorial of gray Georgia granite bears a reproduction of a cartoon by J. N. (Ding) Darling published on the occasion of the death of Hay.

Featured on the program were the Drum Corps from Legion posts at Gowrie and Coon Rapids, the 185th Field Artillery Band from Boone, and National Guard units from Boone, Jefferson, and Audubon. Members of the memorial commission were introduced by chairman C. C. Helmers of Carroll, while State Legion Commander Glenn C. Haynes, said to have been the officer of longest

front-line experience in the American Expeditionary Force, spoke briefly and eloquently. At the close of his address, the American Legion post at Breda "unveiled the monument, which was then decorated by the ladies and the firing squad fired the customary salute, followed by taps and echo taps."

On May 26, 1940, hundreds again gathered in spite of threatened rain to dedicate a stone fence 750 feet long across the front of the cemetery and forming an alcove setting for the Hay monument. Nearly five thousand cubic feet of local stone had been donated for the fence by farmers in Carroll, Sac, and Greene counties. The beautiful and unique wall of rugged materials was designed by landscape engineers of Iowa State College and built as a WPA project. The iron work and gates were fashioned by the National Youth Administration shop in Des Moines.

The State Highway Commission erected "Historic Memorial Ahead" signs at appropriate distances along U. S. Highway 30. As a result, thousands of tourists have, since 1940, stopped to pay their tribute to Merle D. Hay who "left a happy and prosperous country" to fight to the finish for his ideals.

RAY MURRAY